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ABSTRACT

Considerations regarding the undergraduate psychology program at Ithaca College are reviewed. In reevaluating the program, the following projections were made: the number of students who select psychology as a major in preparation for graduate studies will diminish; the majority of students electing the major will primarily need a solid liberal arts education based on the general education principle; a general education will be manifested in the syllabi of the courses, not in course or distribution requirements; in comparison to the student of earlier periods, the student of today is on the whole less prepared, both in terms of skills and the motivation needed to appreciate the discipline required by a science; and while there is a place and need for the liberal arts educated person, there is also a strong trend toward professional education. For the relatively small number of students who intend to pursue graduate studies in psychology, the college has developed a "fellowship" program. Students are assigned either to individual faculty members or to the departmental laboratories and work closely with the assigned staff member, to tutor students or to lead freshman students in the laboratory. For these activities, the students receive a small stipend. (SW)

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CURRICULUM DIVERSIFICATION:

RESPONDING TO CHANGING NEEDS

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The Department of Psychology at Ithaca College is relatively young. It began with a few courses in the early 60s and developed its major's program in the mid-sixties. Like most departmental programs, ours was typical for the time in its assumption -- that the most important purpose of a respectable undergraduate program should be to prepare its majors for graduate studies, hopefully in the field in Psychology, or at least in a closely related field. We did a very good job developing such a program: The majority of our graduates who wanted to enter graduate studies were able to do so, and we were able to convince approximately a third of our students that for them graduate schcolwas indeed the most worthwhile educational pursuit.

This beginning stage was also the time when we were secure in our understanding of the difference between what was and is called the "general education" and what comprises education within the major. The early seventies brought the first change for us as for everybody else: The breakdown of the secure feeling as to what really is general education. This insecurity resulted in the abandonment of general education requirements, such as freshman composition and the foreign language requirement, and in the recognition that whatever shall be understood as general education, in the Humanities for example, will not necessarily mean 6 credit hours in Literature, but could equally be achieved in a variety of other subject areas. Soon thereafter followed the terribly devastating recognition that the main goal of the major's program on the undergraduate level could no longer be understood as that of educating students in preparation for their studies in graduate school.

As a department, we began by the mid-seventies a process of reevaluating what we were doing and what, according to our understanding of the demands facing us, we should be doing. In our search for an educationally-defensible, genuine undergraduate program, we identified four basic considerations for our major's program and two more for our service program.

Time does not allow me to discuss the considerations or their consequences for the departmental program as they relate to the service area, although we have found that there are great opportunities and challenges in this area too.

The four considerations we identified for our major's program are still viable today. They are:

1) The number of students who select Psychology as a major in preparation for graduate studies in the field will diminish in the foreseeable future. But equally important, that type of student will not disappear, and so we have to be prepared to properly educate these students in our major's program.

2) For the present time, probably the most important consideration is that the majority of the students electing the major will primarily need a solid liberal arts education based on the general education principle. But unlike the more traditional arrangement in which general education and major education were two quite distinguishable entities, we felt that any major program for these students will have to be the center, the very core of their general education. This recognition has led us to the understanding that a general education will have to find its manifestations in the syllabi of the courses, not in course requirements or distribution requirements.

3) The student of today in the main is less prepared, both in terms of skills and in terms of the motivation needed to appreciate the rationality and the discipline required by a science, than was the student of earlier periods. This has to do not only with the today hotly-debated question of whether or not our students are adequately prepared in high school; but to a much higher degree than is normally recognized, it is related to the facts that the level of sophistication required in today's studies is very much higher, and at the same time the immediately recognizable rewards, such as the value of the degree and the to-it-related earning power, are very diminished.

4) While there is a place and a need for the liberal arts educated person, as recognized not only by "liberal arts educators" but also by many employers, there is also a strong trend towards "professional education." It is the expectation found amongst parents of students, as well as amongst a sizable group of students and prospective employers, that education should provide marketable skills other than those identified as obtainable in liberal arts education.

The identification of the main considerations for the development of an appropriate major's program does not occur in a functional vacuum; in fact, it develops in close relation with curricular experimentation, and this experimentation in turn has its limitations not only in those considerations but also, and in fact mainly, in those mundane problems such as availability of faculty, number of students to be educated, and the combination of both: The number of contact hours available. It therefore becomes a question of how to invest these contact hours in the most advantageous way. Thus the curricular solutions we have adapted have to be understood as ours, defined equally by the educational philosophy as by the nature of our department and our college. They probably are not the best solutions for other institutions, but they are presented here as an example and perhaps as an impetus for your own program development.

Regarding the first consideration: For the relatively small number of students who intend to go on to graduate studies and who are promising candidates, we have developed a "fellowship" program. Students are elected to this program by the departmental faculty and are either assigned to individual faculty members or to the departmental laboratories. They work very closely with individual faculty members, either to tutor students in need of such services or to lead freshman students through their lab exercises. They do both under close supervision. For these activities, the "fellowship" students receive a small stipend. To understand the importance of this program aspect, one has to be aware that the tutoring service rendered by the fellows is not primarily a time-saving device for the faculty. In fact, faculty spends probably at least an equal amount of time helping the fellows who will help the students in need of help, than they normally would do in direct contact with those students. It represents a shift in faculty activity. If the faculty would render the tutoring services themselves, they would not have the time to spend with the more promising students. We have found the program to be beneficial and challenging to both student groups. The responsibilities of the fellows are closely circumscribed, and the necessities for them to develop communication skills and close working relations with faculty are enormously helpful for their own development. We have also found that the students being tutored benefit from the opportunity to identify the fellows as academic role models.

In relation to our second and third considerations, that the majority of our students will need a strong liberal arts general education-based program and the skills it provides, we have examined our courses and have redesigned them where necessary, so that they serve four integrated purposes: 1) They introduce a specific topic of Psychology, 2) They introduce it in its relation to Psychology as a science, 3) They stress the general education aspect, and 4) They concentrate on particular skill acquisitions which are assigned to particular topic courses.

To give three examples: First, most of our students elect Psychology as a major with only a very vague notion of it as a science. We have therefore developed our freshman year as a one-year Experimental Psychology course. The major goal is to instill the understanding of empiricality in the study of behavioral phenomena in a wide variety of topics. The skills we want to develop are the abilities to operationalize a problem, to define measurements, and to develop in the course of the year an understanding of the advantages of the APA report format.

A second example: Since many students are still shying away from the computer in all contexts except for the activity of computer games, we have decided to teach the Statistics course as an interactive computer course, adding a fourth hour to the three-credit-hour course.

As a last example: Most of our students are able to write reasonable reports about something they have read, but they have difficulties when it comes to synthesizing or contrasting material from different sources. Therefore, in our sophomore-year program, we combine in the format of pro-seminars topic study in motivation or development with the skill components of library studies and writing exercises of the aforementioned nature.

Rather than developing a host of upper-level courses on top of other upper-level courses, all of them dealing with specific topics and most of them appearing in the catalog but rarely being taught, we developed a research-team program. (Where we do develop upper-level courses, they generally are not restricted to majors but are developed as bridges to other areas of study.) Majors in our BA program are required to participate for three semesters in a research team. A research team is a small group of students engaging in student-appropriate research under the leadership of a faculty member. The research area is generally defined by the area of expertise of the faculty member. The student usually joins a team with

research already in progress, is indoctrinated into the team by older team members, and participates in the research group with changing responsibilities in diverse projects for the duration of three semesters. The student has to leave the team after the three semesters and may continue his/her own project either as a supervised independent study or as an Honors Study. Although some of the projects conducted by the teams have lead to reportable research, and some to respectable independent studies, the program is designed so that the majority of the participants will develop their appreciation of the scientific process — its planning, its logic, the underlying rationality of its methodology, and the discipline necessary when doing even small studies. In this respect, the program of the research team is clearly based on the principle of general education, even when we do more detailed, narrowly-defined studies. Additionally, from a logistics point of view, this approach has the advantage of a higher flexibility, and therefore it can accommodate changes in interest on the part of faculty and students much more readily and effectively than do formally-established courses.

Finally, the fourth consideration: The existing trend toward professionalism has presented more of a difficulty for us, primarily since in our own planning we are quite obviously dependent on the cooperation of others outside our own department. We have done two things: First, as I mentioned briefly already, we have committed ourselves to the development of upper-level courses which are designed to build bridges to professional areas such as Communication, Speech Pathology, and so on. Secondly, we have developed a second major: A BS degree program in Psychology and Business. The program maintains the core of the Psychology major program but adds courses in Business - Math, Economics, and eighteen credit-hours in the School of Business. Developing this program has not been simple; it took us three years to have it approved. The program is now starting its third year and can be defined as a success. Its enrollees come only in the minority from our own BA program. The majority who enroll, were originally undecided, exploratory students. And a sizable group of the students enrolled in this program have come from the School of Business, preferring the Liberal Arts-Business combination to a strictly professionally-oriented business program.

In summarizing the advatages of the changes in the curriculum we have so far instituted, I can say that these changes have led to a curriculum structure which is relatively stable and at the same time capable of accommodating a variety of student interests and goals, while stressing the general education idea so central to liberal arts education; and we have been able to do this without having to prostitute our own goal of presenting Psychology as a science.